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THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL IDEALS OF ISRAEL. VI

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STUDY VI

JEREMIAH AND POLITICAL DECADENCE

If Hosea may be called the prophet of the decline and fall of Israel, not less is Jeremiah the outstanding prophetic figure of the last days of Judah and the witness of that period of political decadence which preceded the end.

A youth in the days when Josiah came to the throne, a friend of that prince, of Hilkiah the priest, and probably also of the prophet Zephaniah, he began his religious activities as early as 626 B.C., and continued for more than half a century to interpret the religion of Jehovah to his people.

He was a contemporary of the last five kings of Judah, from Josiah to Zedekiah. He witnessed, and probably took part in, the wonderful Deuteronomic revival of 621 B.C.; he felt the shock of Josiah's tragic death at Megiddo in 609 B.C., which left the prophetic party, and particularly Jeremiah himself, without encouragement or protection, and shadowed all his later years.

He saw Jehoahaz placed upon the throne of his father by the loyal men of Jerusalem, and plucked thence by Necho II of Egypt after a reign of but three months; through the years of the extravagant and headstrong Jehoiakim from 609 to 597 B.C., he observed with distress the gradual disintegration of the state; and he mourned the pathetic fate of Jehoiachin, the son who held the throne only long enough to meet the blow of Babylonian vengeance which should have fallen upon his father.

Then came the final decade under the amiable and wavering Zedekiah, and at last the tragedy of Judah's fall and the destruction of its capital in 586 B.C. Left with the remnant after the flower of the nation had been deported, Jeremiah continued his ministry of warning and consolation until, in the mad panic that followed the murder of the governor, Gedaliah, he was carried away, reluctant and protesting, by the refugees to Egypt. There the curtain fell upon his sorrowing life.

To Jeremiah there was never granted the joy of rousing his people to a noble duty, with the promise of assured success. He knew from the first that the harvest was past, and the summer ended. His preaching bore ever the burden, "It is too late." No longer was it possible to speak, like Isaiah, a message of optimism. Only the tragedy of exile could prepare the nation for a future of service. But out of the sadness of Jeremiah's experience some of the richest elements of prophetic

instruction emerged: and the Sorrowing Prophet of Judah stands as the permanent example of the sacrificial life whose values were brought to their fullest disclosure in the career of the Suffering Servant of God, the Man of Nazareth.

First day.—§ 132. The Prophet's call: Jer., chap. 1; II Kings, chaps. 22-25. Read Jer. 1:1-3, and note that it is the editorial introduction to the book, naming Jeremiah's father (not to be confused with the Hilkiah of II Kings 22:4, 8), his priestly clan, his native town a few miles northeast of Jerusalem, and the kings with whom he was contemporary. These verses, and probably the entire chapter, belong to a much later date than the chapters that follow. Read II Kings, chaps. 22-25 for the story of the last years of Judah. Read Jer. 1:4-10, and notice that the passage emphasizes the youth of Jeremiah at the time he realized his summons to the task of a prophet, and his reluctance to undertake it. How do you interpret this narrative? Was it the form of Jeremiah's own experience of the divine call, or his manner of making that call known to his people? Read Jer. 1:11-19, and observe that two illustrations are used, the white almond tree—the “watcher”—and the boiling cauldron, signifying the approaching troubles with Babylonia the terrible world-conquering nation from the North.

Second day.—§ 133. The idolatries of Judah: Jer., chap. 2; II Kings, chap. 21; Jer., chap. 3. Read Jer., chap. 2, and notice that it is the first section of a group of utterances extending through chaps. 2-6, and representing the earliest preaching of Jeremiah, probably in that portion of Josiah's reign before the Deuteronomic reformation of 621 B.C. Read in II Kings, chap. 21, the story of the idolatrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon. Now observe in Jeremiah's words the evil influences of the former kings even in the days of Josiah. Does the reference to the nation as the unfaithful wife of Jehovah remind you of Hosea? (Read Jer., chap. 3, in this connection.) What foreign alliances are mentioned? In what manner has Judah outdone the idolatry of other nations?

Third day.—§ 134. The Scythian terror: Jer., chaps. 4, 5, 6; Zeph., chaps. 1, 2. Read Jer., chap. 4, and notice that all through the chapter there is reference to an approaching danger so dreadful in its character that the people are paralyzed with fear. Is it probable that this refers to the coming of the Scythians, the “wild horsemen” who are known to have swept down from the North, like the Huns, Goths, and Vandals of later ages, and plundered the nations from Nineveh to Egypt? Read also chaps. 5, 6, and note that the prophet uses the Scythian menace as a means of arousing Judah to a sense of sin, and the necessity of repentance. Read Zeph., chaps. 1, 2, and see how another prophet in Judah, at the same time, made use of the Scythian danger for the same purpose.

Fourth day.—§ 135. Preaching the covenant: Jeremiah's danger: Jer., chap. 11; 12:1-6; II Kings, chaps. 22, 23; Jer. 15:15; 17:18; 18:18-23; 20:10, 12. As in the case of the Book of Isaiah, the material of Jeremiah does not come in chronological order, but needs rearrangement. Read Jer. 11:1-8, and note that the prophet is commissioned to preach something that is called “this covenant” in Jerusalem and Judah. Now read II Kings, chaps. 22, 23, for the story of Josiah's discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple, and his subsequent reformation based thereupon. Is it probable that “the covenant,” as the lawbook

is there called, was the basis of Jeremiah's preaching? Biblical scholars think it practically certain that the lawbook thus found was our Book of Deuteronomy, or at least its nucleus, chaps. 12-26. Now read Jer. 11:9-12:6, and notice that the prophet not only found the people indifferent to his message but actually hostile to him, especially the men of Anathoth, his own town. Read Jer. 15:15; 17:18; 18:18-23; 20:10, 12 for other instances of opposition, and the prophet's desire for the punishment of his enemies.

Fifth day.—§ 136. *False confidence in the temple and its rites:* Jer., chaps. 7-10. Read Jer., chap. 7, and note that it belongs to a series of messages including chaps. 7-10, and seems to belong to a time after the death of Josiah, and in the reign of Jehoiachin, when relapse into idolatry and the prophet's sorrows had begun in deadly earnest. Note the evidences that popular confidence in the temple and its sacrifices was substituted for morality and real religion. Note also the prophet's threat that Jerusalem shall be destroyed as Shiloh was, and the valley of Topheth, south of the city, shall be filled with the bodies of the dead. Jeremiah saw that such evil conduct as he names in these passages is a sign of the nation's decadence and early doom.

Sixth day.—§ 137. *Jeremiah's peril and deliverance:* Jer., chap. 26; Mic. 3:12. Read the Jeremiah passage, and notice the fact that the prophet's denunciations of the city got him into trouble. Who was it that threatened him? Who took his part? What defense did Jeremiah make? What reference was made to the prophet Micah? Read Mic. 3:12, the text quoted. What use was made of the Micah incident by Jeremiah's defenders? What befell the prophet Uriah, who preached a message much like Jeremiah's? What bearing has this chapter upon the character of Jeremiah?

Seventh day.—§ 138. *The palace and the kings:* Jer. 22:1-19; II Kings 23:30—24:7. Read Jer. 22:1-9, and notice that the prophet trembles for the safety of the royal palace unless there is amendment of the conduct of the kings. Jerusalem and the palace were precious to God, for David's sake, but they could not survive if kings like Jehoiakim continued to rule. Read Jer. 22:10-12, and notice the prophet's plaintive reference to Jehoahaz (Shallum). Read also II Kings 23:30-35, for the brief record of his unfortunate reign. Observe that Jeremiah thinks it useless to mourn for the dead Josiah, but the fate of the unhappy Jehoahaz awakens his regret. Read now Jer. 22:13-19, and also II Kings 23:34—24:7, both of which refer to the reign of Jehoiakim. What does Jeremiah say about the ambitions and sins of the king? How does he contrast him with his father? What sort of an end is forecast for him? Did this come to pass? Must it not have required unusual courage for a prophet to utter such words about the king?

Eighth day.—§ 139. *The unhappy prophet:* Jer., chaps. 14, 15. Read chap. 15, and also chap. 14, and note that the two belong together, and speak of a drought which has brought great suffering upon the land, and which the prophet attributes to popular errors, the result of false leadership. Notice particularly Jeremiah's frequent references to his own bitter experiences as a prophet, and the seemingly hopeless character of his work. Was not much of Jeremiah's effectiveness as a prophet due to the heartbreaking difficulties he encountered? Would you say the same of religious workers today?

Ninth day.—§ 140. *Potter and clay:* Jer., chap. 18; Rom. 9:19–24. Read the Jeremiah passage, and note the lesson which a potter in his workshop unconsciously taught the prophet—that God is not compelled to adhere to a fixed plan in selecting his instruments, whether individuals or nations. Israel believed itself to be the people of God, and therefore assured of his favor. But the prophet learned and sought to impress the truth that unless the nation proved worthy of its selection it would be cast aside and another chosen. Read Rom. 9:19–24 for the use Paul made of this same illustration. Notice in Jer. 18:18 the reference to the three teaching orders in Israel.

Tenth day.—§ 141. *Topheth and Babylon:* Jer., chaps. 19, 20. Read chap. 19, and notice that the prophet chose a significant object, a jar of pottery, and a suggestive place, the valley of Hinnom, or Topheth, south of the city, the place where rubbish was burned, and where some of the worst forms of idolatry had been practiced. There he denounced the sins of the city and predicted its destruction, shattering the jar to make emphatic his words. Now read chap. 20, and notice that the priest, in anger, put Jeremiah into confinement, and the latter made still clearer the coming fate of the city at the hands of Babylon. Notice also Jeremiah's strong words of lamentation over his unhappy lot.

Eleventh day.—§ 142. *Seventy years of exile:* Jer., chap. 25; Isa. 10:5 f.; Jer. 29:10; Ezra 1:1; Dan. 9:2. Read the first Jeremiah passage, and note the time at which it was uttered, and the length of time that Jeremiah had been preaching. Note also the singular reference in vs. 9 to Nebuchadrezzar as "my servant," i.e., for the discipline of Judah, and compare Isaiah's reference to the Assyrian in similar terms, in Isa. 10:5 f. Does vs. 13 with its reference to the prophet in the third person sound like a later addition by another hand? Note the long list of nations, the neighbors of Judah, which are also to feel the heavy hand of Babylon (the Sheshach of vs. 26). Look up these nations on the map. But note especially the reference in vs. 11 to the seventy years of the coming exile. Read also Jer. 29:10, and the later references to the same prediction in Ezra 1:1 and Dan. 9:2.

Twelfth day.—§ 143. *The lesson of the Rechabites:* Jer., chap. 35; II Kings 10:15 f. Read the chapter, and notice that it draws an illustration of faithfulness to an inherited obligation from the story of a nomadic tribe who settled near Jerusalem for protection, when the Babylonians invaded the land in 604 B.C. What contrast does Jeremiah draw between these Rechabites and the nation? What is the value of the narrative as a temperance lesson? Read II Kings 10:15 f. for another reference to Jonadab the son of Rechab.

Thirteenth day.—§ 144. *Egypt's humiliation:* Jer., chap. 46. Read Jer. 46:1–12, and note that it is the beginning of a series of oracles regarding the nations near Judah—Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar. These oracles fill chaps. 46–49 and affirm the world-wide rule of Jehovah and his purpose to reckon with the peoples that defy his laws. Do they resemble Amos, chaps. 1, 2? Observe that Jer. 46:1–12 is the prediction of the defeat of Necho II of Egypt by Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon at Carchemish on the Euphrates. Would Jeremiah be likely to rejoice in the defeat of the king who had caused the death of his friend and patron Josiah? Read Jer. 46:13–28, and note that it is the prediction that the victory over Necho shall be followed by the Babylonian conquest of Egypt.

Fourteenth day.—§ 145. *Jeremiah's roll:* Jer., chap. 36. Read the chapter, and note that it introduces Baruch, the friend and secretary of Jeremiah; and that he wrote out the substance of the prophet's previous messages. Would this probably include chaps. 2–12 of our present book? Where was the book read? What was the attitude of the nobles toward it? What did the king do? What was Jeremiah's feeling when he learned what had happened to his roll? Was the message rewritten? Would you suppose the second edition might have included most of chaps. 1–20 of the Book of Jeremiah? Note the bearing of this narrative on the origin of prophetic books.

Fifteenth day.—§ 146. *The fate of Jehoiachin:* Jer. 22:20–30; 24:1; 27:20; II Kings 24:7–16; 25:27–30. Read the first Jeremiah passage, and remember that since the events of the last section the king Jehoiakim has died, and that these words are spoken of the young king, who only reigned three months; also that Jehoiachin (here called Coniah, and in chap. 24 and in 27:20, Jeconiah) was the son of Jehoiakim, and succeeded him in 597 B.C. Read II Kings 24:7–16; 25:27–30, for the story of this unhappy prince, who was compelled to pay dearly for the sins of his father, and who was only released from his Babylonian prison many years later. Observe that it was Jeremiah's view that it was useless for Judah to resist the power of Nebuchadrezzar. The only safety lay in submission and loyalty.

Sixteenth day.—§ 147. *Two baskets of figs:* Jer., chap. 24; II Kings 24:17–20. Read the passage, and note that another son of Josiah, Zedekiah, has been placed on the throne from which his unfortunate nephew was taken to Babylon. Read II Kings 24:17–20 for the story of his accession. Observe that the most resourceful of the people of Judah were taken away into Babylon in 597 B.C. Notice that in chap. 24 Jeremiah compares the two groups of Hebrews, and thinks those who remained in Judah were of little value as compared with those who were taken away.

Seventeenth day.—§ 148. *The yoke of Babylon:* Jer., chaps. 27, 28, and chap. 23. Read Jer. 27:1, and compare it with vss. 3 and 12, and 28:1, noting that “Jehoiakim” is a mistake for “Zedekiah”; also notice Jeremiah's forcible messages to the neighboring nations regarding the certainty of Babylonian victory, and the folly of resistance. Observe his denunciation of the popular prophets, who are insisting that there is no danger, and that the exiles who already have been deported shall soon return. Read also chap. 23 for a bitter rebuke to the prophets who speak without knowledge. Now read chap. 28, the narrative of a personal encounter with one of the misguided “patriots” of Judah. Compare the condition of Judah in this period with the decadence of Spain, Turkey, Persia, and Korea in our day.

Eighteenth day.—§ 149. *Jeremiah's letter to the exiles:* Jer., chap. 29. Read the chapter, and note that the prophet used the opportunity afforded by the departure of an embassy to Babylon to send a letter, counseling the exiles to give up all hopes of an early return, and to refuse to listen to the foolish encouragements of popular leaders who were trying to incite them to attempt opposition to the government in Babylonia, and to escape from captivity. Notice the use made of the yokes, as illustrations of national servitude.

Nineteenth day.—§ 150. *Jeremiah's advice to the king:* Jer., chap. 21; 34:1–7. Read the chapter, and note that in spite of all the lessons which the past had

taught, and the constant warnings of Jeremiah, the court, probably relying on promises of help from Egypt, had involved the nation in fresh trouble with Babylonia. Now King Zedekiah sends to the prophet to inquire regarding the issue of the present invasion of the land. Notice that Jeremiah holds out no hope of escape, but advises surrender to Nebuchadrezzar. Read 34:1-7, a further oracle of the prophet to Zedekiah.

Twentieth day.—§ 151. *The re-enslaved freedmen:* Jer. 34:8-22; Exod. 21:2; Deut. 15:12. Read the Jeremiah passage, and in connection with it read the law in Exod. 21:2 and Deut. 15:12 regarding the release of slaves after six years. Now notice that the people of Judah, when they were threatened by the Babylonian army, sought to gain the favor of God by releasing their slaves; but later, when the danger seemed less, they retracted their good action, and reclaimed their slaves. Observe the indignation of the prophet at this conduct, and his repetition of his oft-repeated prediction of the fall of Jerusalem.

Twenty-first day.—§ 152. *Jeremiah's arrest:* Jer., chap. 37. Read the Jeremiah chapter, and recall the fact that Egypt was always promising assistance to Palestine if it would revolt from Babylonia, but that the prophets felt that this assistance could not be depended on. In the present instance Pharaoh Hophra made an expedition to the aid of Judah against Nebuchadrezzar, but it was of only momentary value. Notice Jeremiah's unwavering confidence that resistance to Babylon was useless. Observe further that the prophet was arrested on the charge that he was deserting. How did he reply? How was he treated? Why did the king send to him? What was his answer? What request did he make?

Twenty-second day.—§ 153. *The last days of Jerusalem:* Jer., chaps. 38, 39; II Kings 25:1-22. Read chap. 38, and note the charge of disloyalty that was made against the prophet. What did the princes wish to do with him? What was the king's attitude toward him? Was Zedekiah unfriendly or helpless? What was done with Jeremiah? How was his life saved? What advice did the prophet give Zedekiah? What request did the king make of Jeremiah?

Twenty-third day.—§ 154. *The Book of Consolation:* Jer., chaps. 30, 31. Read these chapters, and notice their tone of confident hope for the future of the nation. Uttered at the very time when all that the prophet loved was falling into ruins, they breathe the spirit of assurance that Jehovah is working out his plans, even by means of these sore visitations. The mother-heart of Rachel mourns over her captive children from her grave; but they shall return and rebuild their cities. No longer shall their troubles be charged against their ancestors, but each shall recognize his own responsibility. The words of 31:31-40 are among the finest in the Old Testament. They describe the terms of the New Covenant which God will make with his restored people.

Twenty-fourth day.—§ 155. *The field and the promise:* Jer., chaps. 32, 33. Read the chapters, and notice that, as if to bear witness to his confidence that Jerusalem would again be built, after the destruction by the Babylonians (Chaldeans), Jeremiah purchased a plot of ground in Anathoth, his native town. It was as bold an act as that of the Roman who bought the field in which the army of Hannibal was camped. Notice also the confidence of Jeremiah that although the royal house of Judah is overthrown, yet the dynasty of David shall not lack a king upon the throne. This is his glowing messianic hope. Israel's mission is not to fail, for God's covenant shall stand.

Twenty-fifth day.—§ 156. *The fall of Jerusalem:* Jer., chap. 39; II Kings 25:1-22. Read the chapter, and also II Kings 25:1-22, both of which tell the story of Jerusalem's tragic fall. David had taken the city from the Jebusites about 1000 B.C., and Solomon built the temple about 975 B.C. After some four centuries, in 586 B.C. it was totally destroyed, and its people partly taken to Babylon and partly left to care for themselves as best they could without king, temple, or capital. Thus the predictions of Jeremiah were completely fulfilled.

Twenty-sixth day.—§ 157. *The flight into Egypt:* Jer. 40:1-6; chaps. 42, 43. Read these passages, and note that Jeremiah was granted the choice of going with the exiles to Babylon or staying with the remnant in Judah. Choosing the latter course, he tried after the murder of Gedaliah, the governor left in charge of the people, to calm the terrified Hebrews, and persuade them to remain where they were and work out their problems there. But against his earnest protest, they decided to seek safety in Egypt, and took with them the reluctant prophet and Baruch his servant.

Twenty-seventh day.—§ 157. *Last words of Jeremiah:* Jer., chap. 44. Read the chapter, and notice that in the last view we have of Jeremiah, he is witnessing in Egypt to the will of God, in the face of obstinate skepticism and persistent idolatry on the part of his people. What are the arguments of the people regarding the value of serving Jehovah? What are Jeremiah's answers? Few more pathetic figures are disclosed by history than Jeremiah, laboring for more than half a century against overwhelming odds, yet ever true to the divine purpose, and bearing to the end his heavy burden of sorrow in behalf of the people he loved. If Jeremiah were living today what would be his attitude toward public life and responsibilities?

Twenty-eighth day.—*The times of Jeremiah.* The foregoing sections have given convincing proof of the decadent period in which Jeremiah's ministry fell. The reign of Josiah (639-609 B.C.) witnessed an earnest effort on the part of the king and the prophetic party to eradicate the evil results of the policy of Manasseh and Amon; and the great reformation of 621 B.C., based on the Book of Deuteronomy, was a determined effort to restore the ancient worship to its rightful place. But it was too late. Popular sentiment was hostile, and the king's untimely death removed the central figure in the movement. Jehoahaz reigned but three months (609 B.C.). The reign of Jehoiakim (died 597 B.C.) was a steady moral decline. The kingdom was drained of its resources, and its vacillating policy involved it with the great power on the Euphrates. Jehoiachin only reigned for a brief period, and the last of the kings, Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.), had no strength to uphold the tottering fabric. The fall of Judah was due to inherent weakness, the result of luxury, immorality, entangling alliances, and foolish leadership. Are these to be found in modern nations?

Twenty-ninth day.—*The man Jeremiah.* Few men have ever been given a more difficult task than that assigned to this prophet. Naturally sensitive to the opinion of the community, and a patriot of the most devoted type, he was placed in the unhappy position of seeming to be both pessimistic and unpatriotic. No doubt is left in the mind of the student that his life was often in danger (see 11:19, 21; 12:6; 15:15; 18:18; 20:10). There were times when his sorrows seemed to him too heavy to be borne (see 8:18; 9:1; 15:10, 17; 16:1; 20:14-18). At

other times he broke out into fierce invective against his enemies (see 12:3; 17:18; 18:18-23; 20:12). Once he decided to give over altogether the work of a prophet: but the inner impulse was too strong, and he went on (see 20:9). He never doubted that his commission was from God, and that through all his sorrowful life he was working out the divine purpose (see chap. 1; 15:16; 26:15). He is the sorrowing prophet, but also the messenger of eternal hope.

Thirty-tenth day.—The Book of Jeremiah. Like the Book of Isaiah, this collection of prophetic messages is neither arranged in chronological order, nor is it all from the prophet himself. As the material is too extensive to find inclusion in a treatment of this kind, it has been necessary to omit certain portions. But all the essential sections have been included. Chap. 36 describes the origin of what was probably the first and second editions of the book. As already suggested, the portion there written by Baruch may have embraced chaps. 1-20. Other sections were probably prepared from time to time, either by the devoted Baruch or by other hands. Portions of the final chapters are copies of the documents of II Kings. In spite of its mournful tone, the Book of Jeremiah is one of the most beautiful in the prophetic collection, especially the Book of Consolation, chaps. 30-33.

Thirty-first day.—The Message of Jeremiah. There were at least four periods in the long ministry of Jeremiah: the first, the enthusiastic and measurably successful time, including his earliest work and the period of the great reformation; the second, the years of disillusionment and disappointment, after the reformation, when the tendency to relapse into the evil ways of Manasseh's reign was all too apparent; the third, the critical and disastrous time of national decadence, from the death of Josiah to the coming of Nebuchadrezzar; the fourth, the period of full illumination and confident hope, at the end. The message of Jeremiah included denunciation of popular idolatry and the immoralities which it stimulated; of the popular preaching, which repeated the confident hopes of Isaiah in an age when Isaiah's message was no longer timely; and of the political policies of men like Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, who either encouraged foreign influences or were too weak to resist them. On the constructive side, Jeremiah emphasized the purpose of God for the nation, the safety of the moral life, and the survival of the chastened and enlightened Israel. Is it well to consider here the failure of Israel to recognize the truth of her prophet's message and to raise the question to what extent we are today turning deaf ears to the voices of our modern political and social prophets? Not the least important of the truths taught by Jeremiah is the value of suffering as a moral discipline and a preparation for service. This is equally true of the individual and the nation. When the present great war is over, will the world-peace be more secure because of the chastening effect of suffering upon nation and citizen?